The Ambition of Mark Truitt

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SYNOPSIS.

Mark Truitt, encouraged by his sweetheart, Unity Martin, leaves Bethel, his native town, to seek his fortune. Simon Truitt tells Mark that it long has been his dream to see a steel plant at Bethel and asks the son to return and build one if he ever gets rich. Mark applies to Thomas Henley, head of the Quinby Iron works, for a job and is sent to the construction gang. His success in that work wins him a place as helper to Roman Andzrejzski, open-hearth furnaceman. He becomes a boarder in Roman's home and assists Piotr, Roman's son, in his studies. Kazia, an adopted daughter, shows her gratitude in such a manner as to arouse Mark's interest in her. Heavy work in the intense heat of the furnace causes Mark to collapse and Kazia cares for him. Later Roman also succumbs and Mark gets his job. Roman resents this and tells Mark to find another boarding place. Five years elapse during which Mark has advanced to the foremanship, while his labor-saving devices have made him invaluable to the company. In the meantime Kazia has married one Jim Whiting. Mark meets with an accident which dooms him to be a cripple for life. He returns to Bethel intending to stay there. He finds Unity about to marry another man and wins her back. Unity urges him to return to his work in the city. Mark rises rapidly to wealth and power in the steel business, but the social ambitions of his wife make their married life unhappy. Constant bickerings wear out Mark's patience and he makes threats of divorce.

CHAPTER XIV.

In the Mold.

Then began what promised to become a rake's progress. Mark sought out new companions and got himself invited to join their revels. He tried hard, at first recklessly, then determinedly and then wistfully to enter into the spirit of dissipation. The attempt was a flat failure. The thoroughgoing habit of mind that looked unerringly for the last result saw through at once to the dregs in the cup. His companions privately laughed at the spectacle of this hard serious man awkwardly essaying the role of devil of a fellow; but for the humor he thus unwittingly provided they would soon have got rid of him as a death's-head at their feasts. He succeeded only in still further impairing his health, in acquiring a bad taste in the mouth and relaxing all along the line his habit of rigid abstemiousness.

After a few months he returned to the old routine.

"I hear," Henley interrupted a consultation one day to remark, "you've been sowing wild oats. Got 'em all harvested?"

Mark nodded, grinning sheepishly. "Crop's in the barn—and for sale cheap. I agree with the prophet that all is vanity."

"What made you do it?"

"I don't know. To see what it's like, I guess. But I didn't have the knack of it."

"Trouble at home," thought Henley shrewdly.

Aloud he said: "I imagine not. You'd better stick to business, where you fit in."

"I sometimes think that's all vanity, too."

"At least we have something to be vain over. And on the whole there's more romance in making steel than in helping to support the Tenderloin."

Mark made a gesture of disgust. After a frowning pause, he answered: "I don't know. The trouble is, I've lost the romantic point of view. To me the business is nothing but a money-making machine now—and something to do. I wonder why we work so hard to get money we don't need. We get no good out of it. Timothy Woodhouse gets more pleasure out of his flying machines that won't fly."

"Just wait," said Henley dryly, "until somebody tries to take it away from you. Nearly every man of unusual vitality goes sooner or later through the stage of questioning the existing scheme of things. Things are, is all the answer he gets. The sooner he quits asking questions, the better for his peace of mind."

They returned to the matter in hand, which was the fleecing of Timothy Woodhouse.

No one would have been more surprised than Timothy to learn that he had any fleece worthy of the attention of such shearers as Henley and Truitt. But years before a Lochinvar had come out of the West with stock to sell in the Iroquois Iron Ore Mining, Development & Transportation company. He had a gifted tongue. He departed for his own place, a richer and doubtless a wiser man, having received a profitable lesson in the credulity of his fellows. Later inspection revealed that the long-named company's properties consisted of an immense field of admittedly good ore, but its development work only of the extraction of the sample so proudly exhibited by the promoter and its transportation facilities of a franchise to build a railroad through 300 miles of wilderness. In those days the building of railroads was not lightly undertaken. The investment seemed to fall short of Lochinvar's prospectus.

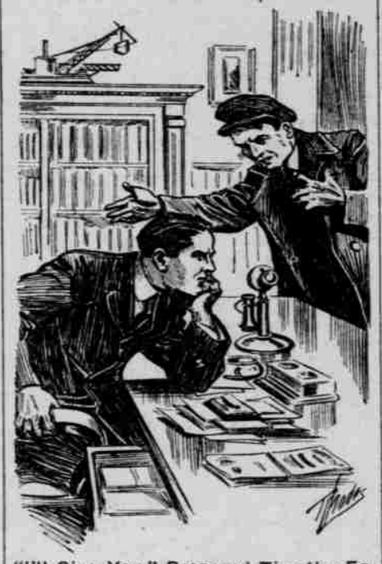
"Naturally!" Timothy once said ruefully. "Since I invested."

But a time had come when makers of steel began to operate on a larger scale and to look far ahead into the future. The MacGregor company conceived the project of buying that ore field and building that railroad. It commenced secretly and leisurely picking up blocks of stock in Lochinvar's company; it could be bought for the proverbial song. But Henley got wind of it. He, too, began buying stock, secretly and swiftly, also for a song. By the time the MacGregor company learned of his rivalry, he needed but a thousand shares to own control of the company, its properties and franchises.

"And I know just where those shares are to be had," Henley told Mark. "Do you know one Timothy Woodhouse?"

"I bought my house from him. And he wants me to lend him money to build his new flying machine. He came to me," Mark chuckled, "as one inventor to another."

"Get that stock," Henley commanded. "Act quick and you can get it cheap. We can't build that railroad. Or rather, we won't. 'Let the other fellow blaze the path!'" This sneering quotation was from the illustrious but cautious Quinby. "That's what comes from working with a coward. But that's no reason why we shouldn't turn an honest dollar at the expense of MacGregor, is it?"



"I'll Give You," Proposed Timothy Eagerly, "a Half Interest in the Machine."

It is not, however, true, as alleged in the bill in equity Timothy was afterward induced by MacGregor agents to file against Mark, that "the said Truitt falsely and fraudulently and with intent to deceive and defraud, represented to the said Woodhouse that said stock was of no value whatsoever, the while knowing that said stock had the value hereinbefore set forth." Mark, who prided himself on his honesty, was always careful not to lay his projects open to legal interference. In this case, that special Providence which seems to guide the schemes of men of such honesty, graciously rendered legal fraud unnecessary.

"By George!" he exclaimed when at their next meeting Timothy, with the model before them, had explained his plans for the new machine. "By George! It may be—it may just be—that you've hit it. It sounds plausible, anyhow."

"I prize your opinion," said Timothy gratefully, "the more because you've done something mechanically yourself. I meet so much skepticism. Do you think you'd care to finance this?"

"Well," Mark returned to caution, "after all, aerial navigation is hardly in my line. I really ought to have some security, don't you think?"

"I'll give you," proposed Timothy eagerly, "a half interest in the machine."

Mark seemed to be fighting down an impulse. But he shook his head. "You see, its value would be scientific rather than commercial. And I'm just a plain money-grubber, you know."

Timothy sighed. "That ends it, I guess. All I've got is mortgaged to the limit now. I'm disappointed, though."

"Still," Mark went on slowly, "I'd like to do it. Haven't you anything that would give business instinct even an excuse to be silent?"

"Nothing. Unless," Timothy ventured timidly, "you could call Iroquois Iron an excuse."

Mark grinned broadly. "I've heard of that bubble."

Timothy, too, grinned, though unhappily. "Bubble, I'm afraid, expresses it exactly."

Mark spent a minute in frowning study of the model. "It would be something," he admitted at last, "to contribute even money to what might turn out to be the invention of the age. I believe—I believe I'll take the excuse." He made a sudden reckless gesture. "I'll do better. I'll go the whole hog and buy the stock. Mr. Woodhouse, you would talk the birds out of the trees!"

It was ridiculously easy.

But the event had a sequel. Scarcely a week passed when Timothy returned. Timothy was evidently excited.

"Have you discovered some new important principle of your machine?" Mark inquired.

"No," Timothy answered. "I have come to buy back that stock."

"Oh, no! I'm satisfied with my bargain."

"But," Timothy explained innocently, "I have discovered that it has a value in excess—very much in excess—of what you paid me for it."

"The less reason then," Mark smiled, "why I should sell it back to you."

"But," Timothy swallowed hard and down went pride, "you don't understand. It would be a great favor to me. I have been careless—I may as well speak out and say that I am a very poor business man. I have lost almost everything I inherited. What is left is mortgaged almost to full value, except this stock which I now find I can sell for enough to clean up my obligations and give me a new start."

"And which is now mine."

"Which is now yours, through a hard bargain—an inadvertently hard bargain, of course," Timothy added hastily. The troubled look in his eyes deepened. "And now I come to you as one gentleman to another, to ask you to release me from it."

"That would hardly be business-like."

"But this is not business. I said, as one gentleman to another." Timothy was guiltless of humorous intent. "For myself I shouldn't think of disturbing any advantage your interest in my work might accidentally give you. But to my wife and daughter, who are entirely dependent upon me, this would mean much."

"Isn't it a little late, after wasting your substance in riotous invention, to begin thinking of them? Besides," Mark looked at his watch pointedly, "I hardly see your right to ask me to give them the consideration you've never given them."

Timothy flushed painfully, rising. "You refuse, then?"

"I do."

"Then you had this stock in mind all along?"

"If you'd made as shrewd a guess before—" Mark grinned.

"I was told you are apt to do this sort of thing."

"The loser in a deal," Mark reminded him coldly, "always finds something to criticize. If there's nothing else I can do for you—good day, Mr. Woodhouse."

"So this is what you call a deal? I should choose another term. I shall take enough of your time to give you my view of it. You came to me to get that stock, but you did not come frankly. You resorted to subterfuge. You flattered me. You took advantage of your inside knowledge of its value and of the fact that I'm rather a fool in such matters to get it absurdly cheap. But I suppose one need hardly expect particularity of conduct from your sort."

Mark sneered. "At least you felt no obligation to particularity of conduct when you thought you were getting a good round sum for something of no value at all."

"That," said Timothy with dignity, "I supposed and you pretended was practically a gift to science. I shall keep you no longer, sir."

And Timothy stalked away. For several days Mark's familiars observed in him an unusual irritability of temper.

Steel had come into its own. It was the first principality of industry. Swiftly as the sun seeks its zenith, its leaders were rising to power and prestige, doing big things in a big, bold, precedent-defying fashion that stirred the world to a just admiration. And above the others—in the estimation of all who did not march with the army of steel—towered that giant MacGregor, and in his shadow but too big to be obscured wholly, Jeremiah Quinby, their names and fame known wherever the stout fabric was used.

After many years Quinby's project was a fact, the more splendid for the delay. It stood just across the street from MacGregor's library. This proximity called for a comparison, by which the Institute of Paleontology suffered no whit. Somehow its noble lines and masses, in exact copy of the Parthenon, seemed to suggest in its founder a simple majesty of character not shared by the author of the elaborate library.

MacGregor could not have believed that a comparison was intended, since he accepted an invitation to share with Quinby himself and an ex-president of the United States the honors on the occasion of the dedication. He, as did the ex-president, made a speech, in which he paid a high tribute to his "brother in the great work of distributing surplus wealth." This tribute Quinby, when his turn came, formally assigned to "the thousands of obscurely faithful" who had "given their strength, their courage, their patience and talent, nay, oft their very lives, to upbuilding the industry which made this project possible." Some of his hearers interpreted this merely as the too great modesty of superlative, triumphant genius. But when, expanding this text, he thus brought his peroration to a close:: "Let labor and capital, the Siamese twins of production, dwell together in unity, in amity, in the forbearance that springs from love!" the audience applauded enthusiastically; reckless of damage to new kid gloves.

That evening, in the cella of the institute, was held a great reception. The Truitts were there—as who that counted was not?—but together only until they had reached the end of the receiving line. Mark betook himself to a chair in a corner occupied by the skeleton of some prehistoric monster and there watched the crowd.

He caught a glimpse of Unity, a beaming happy Unity, the center of a laughing group, and scowled angrily. . . . Though their life had been superficially unchanged, he had had his freedom. It had been a partial useless freedom that he did not want, paid for by the loss of even the pretense of affection, by an ill-disguised mutual aversion.

His reflections were interrupted by a hand on his shoulder. Henley sat down beside him.

"Taking it in?"

Mark nodded.

"We're outshone."

"As the stars by the sun. Do you care?"

"No!" snarled Henley, in a tone that gave his words the lie. Mark repressed another sneer. Here was Henley, the man of magnificent achievements, of real genius, jealous as a woman over Quinby's hollow glory!

"He seems," Mark nodded toward the resplendent Quinby, "to attract the women."

"It's mutual. As I happen to know."

"So? I'd have classed him with the vestal virgins. Isn't he a little old for the woman game now, though?"

"He's in his fifties," Henley said, "and well preserved. And the man who has nothing to do but to idle around the globe and spend the money others make is always easy picking for the Delilahs."

"Quinby doesn't just meet my notion of a Samson."

"Samson," returned Henley, who felt the better for his outburst, "was a penny-wit."

Later, Henley and Mark left their refuge and sauntered through the crowd. It chanced that Quinby espied them. He deserted an admiring group to greet them paternally.

"A lifelong dream has been realized, thanks partly to you"—he placed a hand on Henley's shoulder —"commander in the field. And to you"—he laid the other hand on Mark —"his chief lieutenant."

It was a striking tableau. Quinby, modestly unaware of the many eyes upon them, held it a moment, then gracefully withdrew.

"My commander in the field!" sneered Henley. "Drunk! Blind drunk with self-importance!"

"How much better are we?"

"Sometimes," Henley said coldly, "you talk like a fool." He strode away.

Mark, left alone, began to pick his path gingerly around trailing gowns and chattering groups, in search of fresh air and quiet. But once, as he was passing a group of men, a remark arrested his attention. He did not know the speaker, but he halted sharply and addressed him.

"Who was that you said committed suicide?"

The man looked at him strangely a moment before answering.

"Timothy Woodhouse. It was practically suicide. He insisted on going up in his new flying machine. Broke his neck, of course."

Mark passed on quickly. Not so quickly but that he overheard an explanation.

"The man that skinned Woodhouse."

CHAPTER XV.

Stuff of Dreams.

When his spirit for it was dying, Mark's campaign of conquest came to its grand climax—he became a stockholder in the Quinby Steel company, one of the "young partners" of whom Quinby, in all things abreast of his great rival, was wont to speak with such paternal enthusiasm. Up to this time he had been merely an employe, handsomely paid but finding his chief reward from Henley's profitable friendship.

When, through Henley, Mark laid the matter of partnership informally before Quinby, he was allowed to see through the philanthropist to—Quinby. At first Quinby unctuously but firmly

He Placed a Hand on Henley's Shoulder.

refused his assent, turning arguments aside by the simple expedient of ignoring them. When Henley, at whose suggestion Mark had demanded the right to purchase stock, insisted with rising anger, Quinby donned a frigid dignity.

"Do you want the company to lose Truitt?" Henley demanded.

"I can not conceive," Quinby answered coldly, "that any man who owes as much to my company as Truitt does could be so lacking in loyalty and all fine sensibilities as to desert me."

"That," said Henley curtly, "is damned nonsense. The company owes more to Truitt than the stock we ask can ever repay, more than to any other man—with one exception."

"I am glad," Quinby thawed slightly, "that you make an exception."

"Yes. Myself."

Quinby's face was a study.

"And," Henley continued, "you can let him have this stock or lose Truitt and me."

Thereupon Henley wrote out and gave to Quinby his resignation from the chairmanship. There was a tense silence while Quinby studied the paper.

"Very well," he said at last. He tore the resignation into little bits.

But it was a graceful surrender. During the pause Quinby had regained his poise. He was once more the gracious patron, apparently blind to Henley's show of dislike.

"Ah! my dear Tom," he shook his head smilingly, "that was hardly fair. You played upon my affection. You know there is no sacrifice I would not make rather than lose you."

"Humph!" grunted Henley. "This is no sacrifice."

"Of course," the philanthropist went on, "Truitt takes under our agreement."

And this launched another long argument. For under the Quinby company agreement—borrowed, indeed, from his friend and rival, MacGregor—any stockholder, upon written demand by three-fourths of the stockholders owning three-fourths of the outstanding shares, could be compelled to surrender his stock at its "book value;" a provision from the threat of which Quinby, owning the majority of the stock, alone was exempt. Had his own interest not been so deeply concerned Mark might have relished the spectacle of the tremendous arrogant Henley hurling himself in vain against the paternal Quinby. Mark did not deceive himself as to Henley's real purpose, which was not to serve him but to set up a precedent to upset the agreement.

"It isn't fair to Truitt," Henley protested vehemently. "It isn't fair to any one but you. How can he, how can I, how can any of us, know when you're going to make a deal with the others to kick him out and cheat him out of the real value of his stock?"

Tact was the one weapon Henley knew not how to wield. Quinby gave him a pained glance.

"You know I'm not a hard man. And you know that is a contingency not likely to happen."

"It happened to Cauler and Stebbins and New."

"Ah! But they," Quinby reminded him, "got an exaggerated idea of their importance to the company."

Henley glared. Quinby smiled.

The mellifluous voice flowed on. "You should know that men in my position may not consider their private impulses. Our wealth is a trust—a sacred trust." He paused, perhaps to control the rising emotion inspired by thought. "The secret of my success has been harmony in my organization. Harmony I must have—I will have. And so I must reserve the right and means to oust any who seek to disturb it. The work to which I have given myself—the projects you, I fear, hold so lightly—depends too closely on my business success to allow me to violate successful precedents. Even," he beamed on Mark, "even for the sake of your brilliant young friend. Even for you."

Quinby's face had not put off its smiling benevolent mask. His voice had not risen nor lost by so much as a note its wonted musical stately cadence. But Mark, a silent and almost forgotten listener, knew that in the last words menace spoke as clear and venomous as in the hiss of a snake. He could interpret the menace; Henley had rested too securely in his importance to the company; he now had his warning; like Damocles' sword the power of Quinby's contract rested heavy overhead.

If he had not known from Quinby's voice, Mark would have understood from him to whom the menace had been spoken. Henley's hands, resting on the desk, clenched until the nails bit into the palms. The ugly imperious face was deathly white. His black eyes blazed. Mark thought for a moment he was about to spring upon Quinby and inflict physical injury, or at least hurl at the vain shallow poseur the splendid defiance of the man of real worth, of invincible and unpurchasable spirit. Because he had a profound respect and a sort of love for Henley, he wanted to see and hear that defiance. He forgot his own interest in the scene.

Henley reached again convulsively, for pen and paper. Quinby raised a hand—a beautiful, soft, perfectly manicured member—in humorous protest.

"My dear Tom!" How the purring paternal phrase, addressed to Henley, stung! Mark felt the hot blood rise, resentful for his master. "If you are about to resign again, I beg of you, consider. I have made one concession to that threat. But if you make it again, I shall be obliged to break off a relation that has been both pleasant and profitable. It will cost me something, perhaps, but—it will cost you more."

"Now!" muttered Mark.

Now was the time to hurl defiance, to overwhelm Quinby and Quinby's power under manly scorn. . . . Quinby, outwardly serene as midsummer's skies, smiled on. Henley was silent. The blazing anger in his eyes died down to a smoldering, sullen, futile rage. The pen dropped from his hand.

What a shattering of idols was there! Mark turned away that he might not see.

His glance fell upon Quinby. The mask of benevolence had been pulled aside. Ugly triumph and still uglier hate shone. In that moment Quinby's revenge for a thousand sneers and the open contempt of years was taken. Mark hated him.

After a long heavy silence Quinby turned to Mark. "Do you accept the agreement?"

"It seems to be Hobson's choice."

Quinby rose and took Mark's right hand in both of his.

"Let me be the first to welcome you into the company. I'm sure we shall be—harmonious."

"I can see," Mark answered with a shrug, "that harmony pays."

Quinby was gone. Mark, sickened and saddened, watched a man, for the moment mad, belatedly giving voice to his rage. He paced swiftly back and forth across the room, like the wild beast he had become. He cursed incoherently the departed Quinby, pouring forth a flood of coarse blasphemies. He flung his arms about, smote and kicked chairs and desk as though they had lives to be taken. This, with Quinby present, would have struck a responsive chord in Mark's barbaric soul. But this, with Quinby gone, from the man who had sat silent under threats, called forth only contempt.

"My success! My company! My work!" Henley stopped, panting and glaring, before Mark. "My God! Did you hear him? Fool—fool—fool!"

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "Your mistake was in thinking him a fool."

"And I—I had to sit there and take his oily threats—"

"At least, you took them."

"—I, who made this company—I, who gave him the money to advertise himself around the world—I—! I'm

Henley Glared. Quinby Smiled.

the fool. You're the fool. We're all fools, working our lives out to build up this business while he, who does nothing, gallivants about spending millions on his accursed institutes—never knowing when he'll close in on us and rip us out of our jobs and rightful profits—"

"I used to think that about you, when I was in the mills. I suppose the men think that about us now." Mark's laugh was a sneer.

Henley turned on him. "And you," he snarled, "I made you, too. And I suppose, when Quinby cracks his whip, you, too, will fall into line and help to rob me of the stock I've made valuable. You, with your 'Harmony pays'—"

An hour before Mark might have quailed before Henley's wrath. Now he did not quail.

"See here!" he said sharply, pushing away the fist under his nose. "Probably you're right. Probably I'll fall into line. I hope not—for my own sake. But you can talk to me like that when I give you the excuse. And now you," he added coldly, "had better pull yourself together. There are clerks within hearing."

Henley dropped heavily into a chair. Slowly the paroxysm subsided. In silence Mark watched the white, still working face.

It was Henley who spoke first, and surprisingly. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm wondering, does money make cowards of us all?"

Henley stared hard. For a moment Mark thought that again a match had been touched to the magazine of his rage. Then the red of shame crept into the older man's countenance. He made a gesture of dejection.

"You're a witness that it does."

Mark limped slowly away from the Quinby building.

Now, by all the rules of the game he played, was the time to exult. The monster was tamed, or at least forever baffled; it need not, looking upon him, lick its slobbering chops. Whether or not the partnership—final trophy of Eldorado's conquest—survived Quinby's treacherous caprice, the adventurer would never again know the haunting fear that lashed the crowd. He had no need to catch its hurrying pace.

Yet he did not exult. He had what he had set out to win, and he had it not. His triumph was fact. But the sense of it, the swelling of soul, the surging passionate pride he had foretasted in his young dreams, were not. Success was but figures on a balance sheet.

He had succeeded in a life in which sentiment, brotherly kindness, mercy, were the badges of failure; yet the thought of a weak Timothy Woodhouse, dead in an hour of recklessness bred by a cheat, could drive sleep from his pillow.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Found in Sing Sing Prison.

Found, a photograph, a tintype of a young girl. Owner may secure it by applying to the editor-in-chief.—Sing Sing Star of Hope.